

Dry-cleaning chemical comes out of the closet in Copley

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COPLEY TOWNSHIP — Tetra-chloroethylene is a confounding name for a dangerous chemical. The Ohio EPA is investigating it, the U.S. EPA is cleaning it up, and some Copley Township residents are wondering how much they may have breathed or ingested from their once-treasured well water.

But the chemical, also known as PCE, has been hanging around in almost everyone's closet, at one time or another.

EPA and health officials say the substance at the heart of a Superfund cleanup at a Copley Township shopping center is the same stuff wafting off your clothes fresh out of their dry-cleaning bags.

That little sniff does not contain enough PCE to signal danger, according to state health officials. But in high concentrations, PCE can cause a number of nasty health problems.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, short-term exposure to high levels in poorly ventilated areas can result in sleepiness, headaches and nausea. Studies using concentrated amounts of PCE on animals have shown damage and cancer in the liver and kidneys.

In Copley, a store where several dry cleaners have operated over the last 30 years is the suspected source of contamination in nine residential water wells.

Health officials advised Copley residents at an informational meeting Wednesday that they had been exposed to the chemical but that it didn't appear that exposure levels were high enough for long enough periods of time to cause noticeable health effects.

"In the long run, they don't know what the long-term effects are," said Karl Hiss, whose well is slightly contaminated. "I'm not so much concerned about my wife and myself — it's our baby. When he gets in the bathtub, he likes to drink the water and blow bubbles and spit it out. They don't know what the effects are on children; they might be different."

Another resident, Richard Baumgartner, is concerned about some health problems his wife has had and wonders if they could be related to the significant contamination found in their well water.

PCE is classified as a highly volatile organic compound because it tends to easily change from a liquid to a gas at relatively low temperatures.

For instance, Copley residents with contaminated wells were advised

not to boil their water, because it would cause the chemical to be released from the water into the air, where it might easily be inhaled.

Residents also were advised to keep doors and windows open when showering or bathing to minimize exposure, for the same reason.

PCE was one of the toxic air pollutants Congress required the U.S. EPA to begin regulating under the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990.

Bruce Varner, regional air toxics coordinator for the U.S. EPA, said the first regulations governing air emissions of PCE were passed in September 1993, with some amendments three months later.

Varner said that while the Clean Air Act has been in existence since 1970, PCE was not on the list of hazardous air pollutants regulated by the agency then. Its handling as a hazardous substance by dry cleaners has been regulated since 1980.

The contamination in Copley was discovered after the Ohio EPA began investigating reports of an odor in the water at Copley Square Plaza businesses, among them Danton Cleaners, which recently closed. Danton was one of several dry-cleaning stores that have operated at the site since the 1960s.

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